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SUBJECT: Local Election Preview / SW Germany

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¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: On June 13, three states in SW Germany -- Baden-Wuerttemberg (B-W), Rheinland-Pfalz (R-P) and Saarland -- will hold local elections concurrently with EU-wide European Parliament elections in an effort to increase voter participation. Local elections will serve as a bellwether for the overall political climate in southwestern Germany and could have an immediate impact on the political future of important figures including R-P Christian Democrat (CDU) flag-bearer Christoph Boehr and B-W Minister President Erwin Teufel (CDU). We expect strong support for conservatives in all three states and continuing dissatisfaction with the national government and Chancellor Schroeder's Agenda 2010 reforms. END SUMMARY.

Saarland

¶2. (U) Saarland's June 13 local races will take place during the run-up to its September 5 state elections. In 1999, the CDU's strong finish in local elections served to foreshadow the end of the SPD's 15-year rule in Saarland later that year. Popular Christian Democrat Minister-President Peter Mueller continues to draw wide support and is the odds-on favorite to retain his seat in the upcoming contest. Although the SPD currently holds a majority in Saarland's counties, three Social Democrats are up for re-election or are retiring this year, and the balance could change. Of particular interest is the upcoming election for lord mayor of Saarbruecken, the second most powerful person in Saarland. The contest will be wide open, as SPD incumbent Hajo Hoffman is retiring this year.

¶3. (U) Recent opinion polling places the CDU 21 points ahead of the SPD (54 to 33) in Saarland's state elections, with the Greens at five percent and the FDP at three percent. CDU caucus leader Peter Hans attributes four percent of the CDU lead to a "brilliant Minister-President" and another four to a "competitor that gets weaker by the day." Former Saarland minister-president Oskar Lafontaine has had little success in rallying the SPD base in support of the party's lead candidate, Heiko Maas. Social Democrats opine that the continued unpopularity of the national government has undermined their "substantive criticism" of Saarland's CDU administration. Among the smaller parties, FDP state chairman Christoph Hartmann blamed his party's low numbers on Mueller's strength and popularity, noting that "people simply believe the CDU can do it alone." The Greens hope to re-enter the Saar parliament on the back of the SPD's unpopularity and are doubtful that the CDU will lose its absolute majority.

Baden-Wuerttemberg

¶4. (U) Recent polls indicate a comfortable lead for the B-W Christian Democrats while the SPD continues to suffer from general voter dissatisfaction with the national government. In the 1999 local elections, the CDU emerged as the strongest party with 34 percent of the vote state-wide, edging out traditionally strong independent lists (which together garnered 33.7 percent). Social Democrats seek to maintain their 1999 level of support (19.8 percent) based on charismatic SPD Bundestag member Ute Kumpf's challenge to CDU incumbent Wolfgang Schuster in October elections for lord mayor of Stuttgart (B-W's biggest city and home of automotive concerns Daimler-Chrysler, Bosch, and Porsche). Independent voter groups will continue to play a major role on the local level.

¶5. (U) Susanne Eisenmann, CDU standard-bearer in Stuttgart, confided that she believes the Christian Democrats will prevail in local elections, but predicts they will have a hard time making additional gains beyond those made in 1999. Key contacts expect M-P Teufel to declare his political intentions after the elections, and some speculate that Teufel might seek another term if the CDU makes an excellent showing.

Rheinland-Pfalz

16. (U) In the 1999 local elections, the CDU defended its position as Rheinland-Pfalz's strongest party with a showing of 46.1 percent, versus 36.1 percent for the SPD. Other parties all polled single digits (Independents 7.6 percent, Greens 5.0 pct, FDP 4.1 pct). Recent polls indicate that the CDU likely will repeat its strong 1999 performance. SPD sources in Rheinland-Pfalz worry the party's weakness at the national level may cause it to lose ground locally. Although the CDU is framing local elections as a dry run for Rheinland-Pfalz's 2006 state elections, observers currently believe that Minister President Beck's personal popularity could outweigh flagging support for the party and secure him another term.

17. (SBU) Elections in Rheinland-Pfalz may become a referendum not on M-P Beck, but on R-P CDU leader Christoph Boehr. Although the CDU remains strong within Rheinland-Pfalz, Boehr is often criticized within the party for poor leadership and an aloofness that contrasts sharply with Beck's "human touch." According to Ralf Glesius, party manager of the Junge Union (the CDU's youth organization), the CDU will visit the issue of "standard-bearer" after the June elections. The CDU is unlikely to fare poorly, but if they fail to break new ground against a weakened SPD, Boehr's days as party leader could be numbered.

COMMENT

18. (SBU) Although all politics may be local, the continuing unpopularity of the national government will likely be the dominant factor in the upcoming June 13 elections. Conservatives are likely to make strong showings in Baden-Wuerttemberg and Rheinland-Pfalz local elections -- despite leadership struggles within both state parties -- and the SPD will be fortunate even to match its relatively weak 1999 showing. With a popular CDU minister-president and the recent modest upturn in the Saar economy, Saarland's voters seem to have little desire for change. Consequently, the Saar CDU is likely to do very well in local contests and to retain its absolute majority in upcoming state elections.
END COMMENT.

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